

*Varium et Mutabile Semper Femina:*  
Aristophanes' Shapeshifting Lamia and Virgil's Dido

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**Abstract:** A neglected source of possible inspiration for Virgil in the composition of his Carthaginian queen Dido is the triad of folkloric child-slaying monsters known from citations in Aristophanic old comedy. Virgil's borrowing from lore about the Libyan queen Lamia and her transformation into a nightmarish bogey serves to highlight Dido's metamorphosis from responsible ruler of her people to an angry, embittered enemy of Aeneas and his descendants. Further, Virgil may allude specifically to the shapeshifting nature of these mythological monsters in Mercury's misogynistic warning to Aeneas about the eminent mutability of women.

**Resumen:** Una fuente olvidada, posible inspiración para Virgilio en la composición de su reina cartaginesa Dido, es la tríada de monstruos folclóricos asesinos de niños conocida por las citas de la comedia aristofánica. El hecho de que Virgilio recurra a la tradición popular sobre la reina libia Lamia y su transformación en un monstruo de pesadilla resalta la metamorfosis de Dido desde gobernante responsable de su pueblo a enemiga de Eneas y sus descendientes, furiosa y amargada. Además, Virgilio puede aludir específicamente a la naturaleza cambiante de estos monstruos mitológicos en la advertencia misógina de Mercurio a Eneas sobre la eminente mutabilidad de las mujeres.

**Keywords:** Aristophanes, Virgil, Dido, Lamia, Empousa

**Palabras clave:** Aristófanes, Virgilio, Dido, Lamia, Empusa

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Virgil's Punic queen Dido/Elissa has elicited a dense array of critical appraisals and scholarly assessments, not least on the question of her literary and historical *Vorleben*.<sup>1</sup> With good reason, Virgil's celebrated character

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<sup>1</sup> The bibliography is increasingly formidable. The standard commentaries offer a sound introduction: C. Buscaroli, 1932; A.S. Pease, 1935; R.G. Austin, 1955; A. Schmitz, 1960; L.M. Fratantuono and R.G. Austin, 2022. Note also J. Kowalski, 1929; R. Monti, 1981; G. Binder, 2000. On the depiction of Carthage in the epic note in particular E. Giusti, 2018. Elissa seems to be the queen's name, with Dido more properly construed as a title:

composition has been associated with the Medeas of Euripides, Apollonius Rhodius, and Ennius; the Ariadne of Catullus c. 64; as well as with Cleopatra VII Philopator, the foreign temptress and *provocatrice* of the poet's contemporary Augustan Rome.<sup>2</sup> Apart from such formidable figures of inspiration from the worlds of literature and history, by virtue of her curse on Aeneas and his children Virgil's Dido incarnates the troubled relationship of Rome with its *quondam* rival for Mediterranean supremacy, the storied Carthage of North Africa.

Aeneas' Phoenician love interest thus evokes images from the worlds of epic; tragedy; and history in particular. And yet the late antique commentator Servius opined that the fourth *Aeneid* was influenced by the comic genre.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have debated what exactly Servius meant by what has been taken by some as an incongruent analysis of the tale of Aeneas' Carthaginian sojourn. Servius identified the book's focus on *amor* as the reason for its displaying what he considered to be nearly a comic style, a judgment that is noteworthy for its generality, a conclusion that could be made about any number of ancient works.

We shall focus on one aspect in which the Servian judgment on the comic inspiration of *Aeneid* 4 is readily apparent and defensible, a hitherto largely unappreciated, possible intertext for the Virgilian depiction of Dido: the mysterious shapeshifting female monsters referenced in the comedies of Aristophanes, the creatures variously referenced as Lamia; Empousa; and Mormo.<sup>4</sup> We shall explore how Virgil adapted the Aristophanic image of these ghastly, terrifying bogeys as part of his borrowings from Greek literature in the crafting of his Dido.<sup>5</sup> We shall observe how the North African queen is

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"(...) a claim to legitimacy more than a proper name ... a token and guarantee of status." (J. Newman and F. Newman, 2005, pp. 138-139).

<sup>2</sup> On the Medea intertexts see C. Collard, 1975, pp. 131-51. For Dido as Cleopatra note especially P.M. Astorino, 2020, pp. 275-292.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. here W.S. Anderson, 1981, pp. 115-25. More generally on comedy and the *Aeneid*, see R.B. Lloyd, 1984, pp. 853-855; also C. Bourquin, 2019

<sup>4</sup> These are distinct entities, with numerous apparent affinities. It is impossible to know exactly how Aristophanes envisaged each monster, given that the relevant extant citations are uniformly brief and presuppose audience knowledge beyond our own. There is much useful material in H. Björklund, 2017, pp. 22-49.

<sup>5</sup> We may compare the similar work of D. Felton, 2013, pp. 229-244, which seeks to provide a folkloric rationale for Psyche's sisters warning her that her mysterious husband

transformed by her ill-fated, doomed love affair with the Trojan Aeneas into one of the mythological, portentous beasts associated with the wilds of Libya, a lamia whose threats and curses against both Aeneas and his hapless descendants will prove to be not material for comedy, but the all too deadly reality of Rome's history of military engagement with Carthage. Along the way we shall discover that one of Virgil's more celebrated, gnomic utterances about the nature of the feminine is not so much a generic, misogynistic remark about the behavior of women, as it is a quite specific reference to shapeshifting monsters familiar from the comedies of Aristophanes.<sup>6</sup> It will not be our purpose to provide a definitive accounting of the allusions to these enigmatic creatures in Greek and Roman literature.<sup>7</sup> Rather, after considering the general outline of the lore, we shall consider how Virgil may have adopted the material as part of the process of composing his Libyan Dido, with Carthage's queen having been partly inspired by lore about another Libyan queen, the ill-fated Lamia.

We may turn to Aristophanes. His extant plays contain allusions to a triad of shapeshifting female monsters: Lamia, Empousa, and Mormo.<sup>8</sup> Lamia's first appearance in what remains of Aristophanes comes in his *Vespae*, as a ghastly feature of the comic poet's attack on the demagogue Cleon, who is described as a revolting horror, one aspect of which is shared with Lamia:

οὐ δεινόταται μὲν ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν Κύννης ἀκτίνες ἔλαμπον,  
ἑκάτὸν δὲ κύκλω κεφαλαὶ κολάκων οἰμωξομένων ἐλιχμῶντο  
περὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν, φωνὴν δ' εἶχεν χαράδρας ὄλεθρον τετοκυίας,

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is in reality a venomous serpent bent on devouring his bride when she comes to full term with her pregnancy.

<sup>6</sup> Virgil's Dido has been impressionistically analyzed along these lines; cf. J. Newman and F. Newman, 2005, pp. 51-52: "a bitterly frustrated mother ... much worse than anything in Apollonius ... what Roman folklore and satire knew as a child-devouring *lamia*."

<sup>7</sup> We cannot be sure what literature on these monsters was available to Virgil. As we shall explore below, in what survives of classical drama we have several Aristophanic attestations, and one Euripidean. What is certain is that the creatures in question were typically portrayed in comedy and lower genres.

<sup>8</sup> A good introduction to these and related supernatural beings may be found at S.I. Johnston, 1999, pp. 161-200.

φώκης δ' ὀσμὴν, Λαμίας ὄρχεις ἀπλύτους, πρωκτὸν δὲ καμήλου (*Vesp.* 1032-5)<sup>9</sup>

Cleon is described in monstrous terms, including via an allusion to the “unwashed testicles” of Lamia. What gender is Aristophanes’ Lamia, one might ask? The horror mentioned by Aristophanes has the ability, it would seem, to take any form, a conclusion reached by some critics in part via recourse to scholiastic commentary on *Pax* 758.<sup>10</sup> Some critics have interpreted the testicular reference as indicative of hermaphroditism.<sup>11</sup> “Who shall dogmatize as to the sex of Lamia?”<sup>12</sup> Certainly the question of gender identity is compounded by any hint of shapeshifting.<sup>13</sup>

Later in the same play we find a second citation of the creature, as Philocleon muses on the sort of topics he would expound upon in the presence of the wise and learned:

πρῶτον μὲν ὡς ἡ Λάμι' ἀλοῦσ' ἐπέρδετο,  
ἔπειτα δ' ὡς ὁ Καρδοπίων τὴν μητέρα. (*Vesp.* 1177-1178)

Lamia (here certainly female) is said to have broken wind when she found herself caught in some awkward situation; the allusion is obscure, but the monster is probably envisaged as having been caught in some criminal act, with the crude bodily response occasioned by fear.<sup>14</sup> The humor, in any case, is occasioned by the absurdity of the topic for scholarly exchange.

<sup>9</sup> Passages from the play are taken from Z.P. Biles and S.D. Olson, 2015: “A hyperbolic, theriomorphic rendering of the political situation ...”.

<sup>10</sup> Such is the analysis of Biles and Olson *ad loc.*

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g., D.M. MacDowell, 1971, *ad* 1035, who compares the interpretive problems of *Ecclesiazusae* 76-78, where one Lamias is the object of referential mockery. Any male named Lamias would recall the feminine monster Lamia.

<sup>12</sup> M. Platnauer, 1964, *ad* 757.

<sup>13</sup> We may compare too the notion of a powerful queen as a veritable *virago*. D.Serv. comments on *Aeneid* 4.335: “*Elissae autem ‘Didonis’, quae appellata est lingua Punica virago.*”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ecclesiazusae* 76-78, with the scholiastic quote *ad loc.* from what is probably the *Lamia* of Crates. All we can say for certain is that there was an *au courant* joke about a flatulent lamia.

Lamia recurs at *Pax* 755-758, in language copied verbatim from the poet's previous attack on Cleon in *Vespae*<sup>15</sup>:

οὐ δεινόταται μὲν ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν Κύννης ἀκτῖνες ἔλαμπον,  
ἕκατὸν δὲ κύκλω κεφαλαὶ κολάκων οἰμωξιμένων ἐλιχμῶντο  
περὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν, φωνὴν δ' εἶχεν χαράδρας ὄλεθρον τετοκυίας,  
φώκης δ' ὀσμὴν, Λαμίας ὄρχεις ἀπλύτους, πρωκτὸν δὲ καμήλου.

From these quite brief, passing references, we learn little about the nature of a monster whose familiarity to Aristophanes' audience sufficed to allow the poet to dispense with exposition. Beyond the problem of construing the nature of the creature, there is the problem of the confusion as to whether there was one or more than one Lamia: "The Graeco-Roman evidence for Lamia holds much of interest, but also offers many frustrations: it is seemingly divided between an archetypal woman or creature named Lamia and a series of individual creatures termed lamia."<sup>16</sup> In Latin, *lamia* became a word applicable generically to female practitioners of the dark arts,<sup>17</sup> a fact that makes it easy enough to label certain women in epic or other genres as *lamiae* because of either their dabbling in magic or their occult nature and activities.

What of Empousa, the second in our triad of monsters? Again (albeit coincidentally) there are two Aristophanic plays in which the beast is referenced. Empousa figures in the account of the descent of Dionysus and his slave Xanthias to the underworld in the *Ranae*:

Ξανθίας:  
καὶ μὴν ὄρω νῆ τὸν Δία θηρίον μέγα.  
Διόνυσος:  
ποῖόν τι;  
Ξανθίας:  
δεινόν: παντοδαπὸν γοῦν γίγνεται  
τοτὲ μὲν γε βοῦς, νυνὶ δ' ὄρεύς, τοτὲ δ' αὖ γυνὴ  
ὠραιοτάτη τις.  
Διόνυσος:  
ποῦ 'στι; φέρ' ἐπ' αὐτὴν ἴω.

<sup>15</sup> For the text (with commentary) see S.D. Olson, 1998. Olson introduces the perceptive point *ad* 758 that there may be a joke that the effeminate Cleon lacks testicles, and so they are indeed unwashed.

<sup>16</sup> D. Ogden, 2013, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M.T. Paule, 2014, pp. 745-57.

Ξανθίας:  
 ἀλλ' οὐκέτ' αὖ γυνή 'στιν, ἀλλ' ἤδη κύων.  
 Διόνυσος:  
 Ἔμπουσα τοίνυν ἐστί.  
 Ξανθίας:  
 πυρὶ γοῦν λάμπεται  
 ἅπαν τὸ πρόσωπον.  
 Διόνυσος:  
 καὶ σκέλος χαλκοῦν ἔχει;  
 Ξανθίας:  
 νῆ τὸν Ποσειδῶ, καὶ βολίτινον θάτερον,  
 σάφ' ἴσθι.  
 (Ran. 288-295)<sup>18</sup>

Empousa is presented, one might think, as a virtual parody of the horrors associated with the underworld.<sup>19</sup> This is not exactly like the shade of Dido in Virgil's underworld *Lugentes Campi*,<sup>20</sup> but rather like the insubstantial specters at the entrance to Dis<sup>21</sup>; still, we may note that in *Aeneid* 6 the Trojan hero must pass the shade of Dido as part of his quasi-initiation into the infernal regions. Dido is presented as a literal underworld bogey, of a sort very different from the classic monsters such as Cerberus or Empousa, and yet in reality more emotionally traumatizing for Aeneas. The Empousa described by Xanthias has one leg of bronze and one of cow dung; we shall return below to the reference to her strange anatomy.

In Aristophanes' late play *Ecclesiazusae*, Empousa is referenced as part of a young man's disgusted commentary on the physical appearance of an old woman who is trying to seduce him:

Νεανίας  
 οὐκ ἐμέ γ', ἀλλ' ἔμπουσά τις  
 ἐξ αἵματος φλύκταιναν ἠμφιεσμένη.  
 (Eccl. 1056)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The quotation is from K.J. Dover, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> On this scene see further C.G. Brown, 1991, pp. 41-50; also E.K. Borthwick, 1968, pp. 200-206.

<sup>20</sup> *Aeneid* 6.440-76.

<sup>21</sup> *Aeneid* 6.285-94.

<sup>22</sup> For text and commentary vid. R.G. Ussher, 1973.

Empousa is here a generic term (common and not proper noun) for a revolting hag; she is depicted as being clad in a blood blister as she seeks to win the affection of the disgusted youth. In the egalitarian world of Aristophanes' fantasy of female participation in Athenian government, a major theme of the last movements of the play is how young men will be pursued by sexually ravenous older women, with the latter being presented as if they were like some folkloric beast.

Mormo (our third monster) is referenced more often than Lamia or Empousa in what survives of Aristophanes, and yet there is less evidence of peculiar mythology. At *Acharnae* 582 (ἀλλ' ἀντιβολῶ σ' ἀπένεγκέ μου τὴν μορμόνα) and *Equites* 693 (... μορμῶ τοῦ θράσου) there are passing citations, first to "Mormo" (instead of the expected "Gorgo") as an apotropaic shield device,<sup>23</sup> and second as an imprecatory exclamation; cf. the allusive references to Mormo again as an ornament (this time on Lamachus' shield) at *Pax* 474 (οὐδὲν δεόμεθ' ὠνθρωπε τῆς σῆς μορμόνος), to bogeys designed to terrify adulterers at *Thesmophoriazusae* 417 (τρέφουσι μορμολυκεῖα ...),<sup>24</sup> and to things hideous to behold at *Ranae* 925 (δειν' ἄττα μορμορωπά ...).<sup>25</sup> The monster's name, we may observe, thus was employed in several compounds, not without reference to wolves; the lupine significance is unclear, though wolves were an obvious enough predator to occasion association with a bestial horror, and it is likely that there are undertones of lycanthropy.<sup>26</sup> And so Mormolyce is the wetnurse of Acheron in Sophron,<sup>27</sup> an underworld horror with clear wolf-like attributes.<sup>28</sup>

Lamia; Empousa; Mormo: none of the three creatures in question is particularly well documented in extant classical literature, though interesting attestations combine to provide a reasonably clear picture. All were particularly

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. here *Lysistrata* 560, with J. Henderson, *Aristophanes Lysistrata*, Oxford, 1987, *ad loc.*; also *Acharnae* 582 ff., with S.D. Olson, 2004, *ad loc.*

<sup>24</sup> On this cf. C. Austin and S.D. Olson, 2004, *ad loc.*

<sup>25</sup> Cf. too *Aves* 1245, with N. Dunbar, 1997, *ad loc.* At Plato, *Phaedo* 77e Cebes speaks to Socrates about not fearing death as if it were akin to some Mormolyce.

<sup>26</sup> We have scholiastic citation *ad Pax* 474 that theatrical masks were called μορμολυκεῖα, citing Aristophanes fr. 31 ἀφ' οὗ κωμωδικὸν μορμολυκεῖον ἔργων K.-A. (from his *Amphiarus*); cf. fr. 130. See further R. Wyles, 2020, p. 143. It is not certain whether the term is an Aristophanic coinage.

<sup>27</sup> Fr. 4B Hordern.

<sup>28</sup> On all of these "Mormo" words and images, see further M. Patera, 2015, pp. 106-44.

associated with comedy. Lamia is cited in a Euripidean fragment from a homonymous satyr (almost certainly) play,<sup>29</sup> where the title character asks rhetorically who does not know the reviled name of the Libyan Lamia.<sup>30</sup> To this sole surviving fragment of Euripides' *Lamia* we may add several other ancient citations, prominent among them the first-century B.C. account of Diodorus Siculus (20.3-5) that preserves the Euripidean citation. Here finally we are afforded a surviving explanatory narrative. From Diodorus we learn that Lamia was a once beautiful queen, whose loveliness was deformed by her savagery. Having suffered the loss of all of her children, she decided to inflict the same suffering on all the women of her locale, thus ensuring that she would be remembered forever as a frightening, child-slaying monster.<sup>31</sup> In addition to killing children, Lamia was known for bibulousness, such that when she drank to excess, those around her took advantage of her careless distraction to do as they pleased. In a bizarre detail, she is said to have thrown her eyes into a flask, thereby providing a metaphorical commentary on how a measure of wine had deprived her of her sight; indeed Plutarch records that she had the ability to remove and replace her eyeballs at will.<sup>32</sup>

Diodorus may have borrowed his account of Lamia from the *Libyca* of Duris of Samos (c. 280 B.C.), though with more of a rationalizing tendency in place of mythology. According to Duris, Lamia was a beautiful woman with whom Zeus had an affair that occasioned the jealous wrath of Hera; the goddess destroyed Lamia's children, and in turn Lamia sought to slay the children of others in a perverse manifestation of her grief.<sup>33</sup>

Heraclitus Paradoxographus (possibly late first-/early second-century A.D., though the surviving text may well be a Byzantine epitome) provides his own rationalizing version of this lore.<sup>34</sup> His account accords with earlier

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<sup>29</sup> *Lamia* is also preserved as the title of a comedy of the poet Crates, who flourished in the generation before Aristophanes. It is impossible to speculate on the plot.

<sup>30</sup> Fr. 922 Nauck (= *TrGF* 5.1, 42, F 47sm, p. 518).

<sup>31</sup> Dido's comparand Medea was also a notorious slayer of (her own) children; unlike Medea (or Lamia), Virgil's queen will not be able to carry out any of her threats against Ascanius.

<sup>32</sup> *Mor.* 515f-16a. She was said to sleep at home in blindness, only to insert her eyeballs when she went abroad.

<sup>33</sup> *FGrH* 76 F17.

<sup>34</sup> *De Mirabilibus* 34. See here the text and translation (with annotation) provided by J. Stern, 2003, pp. 51-97.

versions, with little by way of expansion. He notes the myth of Zeus' lover and Hera's transformation of the hapless girl into a beast. Lamia tears out her eyes and throws them into a cup; she feasts on human flesh. Heraclitus interprets this to mean that in reality Hera, the jealous wife of "King Zeus," gouged out the eyes of her rival and left her on a mountain. Because she lived alone in the desolate wilds, blind and bereft of aid, she seemed to be living a feral, bestial life.

"Lamia" also figures in several mythological lineages. A scholiast on Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.825 cites Stesichorus' *Scylla* for the detail that the notorious marine horror was the offspring of Lamia; he notes that the reference might be to the Libyan Lamia, or to Lamia the daughter of Poseidon.<sup>35</sup> The same genealogical detail is cited in Eustathius on Homer's *Odyssey*.<sup>36</sup> More obscure is Photius' preservation of Ptolemy Hephaestion's mythographic ascription of Lamia as mother (by Zeus) of an Achilles who challenged Aphrodite to a beauty contest and was in consequence cursed with disfigurement.<sup>37</sup> A scholiast on Theocritus 15.40 names Poseidon's Lamia as the mother of the cannibalistic Laestrygonians. In Pausanias, Lamia the daughter of Poseidon and Zeus were the parents of the Sibyl Herophile, said to be the first woman to voice oracles, on whom the name/title "Sibyl" was bestowed by the Libyans; with this Sibylline attribution we may compare the evidence of the *Suda*, in which Lamia and Apollo are the parents of Sibyl. For Lucian's Thychiades in the *Philopseudes*, Lamia and Mormo are the sort of fantastic creatures that are fit only to charm the naïve minds of children.<sup>38</sup> Aristotle knows of tales of monsters in the form of women, creatures prone to rip open the pregnant and to devour fetuses.<sup>39</sup> Plato's Socrates condemned the practice of frightening children with such (vain) tales.<sup>40</sup> From these additional citations, we find a continuing emphasis on the risk posed by Lamia to children, coupled with a connection of the monster to the sea, as well as to oracles.

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<sup>35</sup> Fr. 220 *PMG*. See further here M. Davies and P.J. Finglass, 2017, *ad loc.*

<sup>36</sup> Eustathius 1714.

<sup>37</sup> From Book 6 of the *Nova Historia*, cited at *Myriobiblon* 190.

<sup>38</sup> *Philops.* 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ethica Nicomachea* 7.15.

<sup>40</sup> *Respublica* 381e.

In extant Latin literature,<sup>41</sup> Horace too alludes to the idea that Lamia would swallow children alive to serve for her lunch:

*neu pransae Lamiae vivum puerum extrahat alvo* (*Ars Poetica* 340)<sup>42</sup>

Lamia tears about the fetus of a pregnant woman to serve for her feast. “Horace’s deliberate conflation of the sites of alimentation and procreation – Lamia is said to have eaten (*pransae*) the child, yet he ends up in her “womb,” *alvo*, – both draws attention to Lamia’s proclivity for eating children (after her own were killed by Hera) and heightens the horror of her actions.”<sup>43</sup> Horace uses Lamia as an example of a topic not recommended for literary embellishment; Virgil, we shall see, may have had other ideas, at least insofar as he was inspired to allude to the lore of these notorious wraiths.

What may we conclude from these oftentimes enigmatic, fragmentary sources? Lamia was a shapeshifting, child-killing monster from Libya, originally a beautiful woman and now cursed to be a hideous apparition of particular harm to the very young. She had some connection with sea monsters and oracles; given that the earliest surviving author said to have cited her is Stesichorus in his *Scylla*, it may be that in origin Lamia was a marine horror, with a mythology that extended from Libya to the traditional Sicilian locus of Scylla. It is impossible to know how much of this portrait of Lamia would have been familiar to Aristophanes; in the absence of further evidence, we are confined to judicious speculation. Virgil was likely aware that “Lamia” referred both to a sea monster and to a Libyan queen, a once beautiful woman who was now a notorious hazard to the welfare of children.

Empousa –another of “the nightmare-women of the Greek imaginaire”<sup>44</sup>– is not as well attested as Lamia, though she too was no abstruse mythological allusion for ancient audiences.<sup>45</sup> Indeed Aristophanes is our oldest extant source for her existence, and one of the few we possess. She is

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<sup>41</sup> For a convenient overview of Latin uses of *lamia* (i.e., as a common noun referring to a shark or a witch), and of related names both epic and historic (Lamus; Lamia), see A.J. Woodman, 2022, pp. 262-4.

<sup>42</sup> For text and commentary see C.O. Brink, 1971: “... the child-eating ogress of ancient fairy tales.” Brink comments on the comic undertones of Horace’s *pransae*.

<sup>43</sup> J. Ferriss-Hill, 2019, p. 58 n. 85.

<sup>44</sup> So R. Buxton, 2009, p. 172.

<sup>45</sup> Demosthenes (18.130) refers to how Aeschines’ mother was called “Empousa,” with reference to at will transformative powers.

certainly a shapeshifter, transforming herself into a bull, a mule, a lovely woman, and a dog (at least if Xanthias' report to his divine master can be trusted). Empousa was definitively associated with the underworld: she was a manifestation of Hecate according to a fragment of Aristophanes,<sup>46</sup> and a being sent by the infernal goddess according to a scholiast on *Ran.* 393.

As with the question of a singular Lamia or plural lamiae, so with Empousa we find a later tradition of empusae (cf. Aristophanes' reference at *Eccl.* 1056). Philostratus may be cited for the lore about these monsters, spectral wraiths who assume the appearance of a beautiful woman so as to seduce young students of philosophy so as to devour them.<sup>47</sup> Here again there is a monster devouring the young, even if youthful scholars have replaced infants and children. Philostratus' monster is described as being greedy for fresh blood, a detail that has naturally enough led to vampiric interpretations; her disguise was as a Phoenician woman sojourning in a suburb of Corinth.<sup>48</sup> Empousa seems to have had less association than either Lamia or Mormo with actual attacks on children, but we do well to remember that our evidence is fragmentary and often enigmatic.<sup>49</sup>

Mormo has characteristics that overlap with Lamia and Empousa. Xenophon alludes to plural Mormos as specters that frighten the immature and young;<sup>50</sup> likewise Erinna alludes to Mormo as a monster that scares children.<sup>51</sup> Mormo is cited at Theocritus, *Id.* 15.40 (this time with equine associations), as a beast that bites little children.<sup>52</sup> Again, the emphasis is on theriomorphic peril for the young.

These monsters are associated in particular with comedy, it would seem, because they were bogeys designed to frighten children, and not entirely to be taken seriously by adults. The idea that a man (let alone a god) should fear such specters was risible (cf. Xanthias' possible charade with Dionysus,

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<sup>46</sup> Fr. 515 K.-A., from the *Tagenistae*.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita Apollonii* 4.25.

<sup>48</sup> Why Phoenician? The provenance of the monster is of uncertain significance. Lamia was Libyan as early as Euripides; this geographical focalization provides a ready connection to Virgil's Dido, while it is more speculative to wonder as to why Second Sophistic Philostratus made his empousa Phoenician.

<sup>49</sup> See here S.I. Johnson, 1995, p. 365.

<sup>50</sup> *Historia Graeca* 4.4.17.

<sup>51</sup> *SH* 401.25.

<sup>52</sup> See further here A.S.F. Gow, 1952, *ad* 39 ff.

possible because it is not clear whether the slave merely is pretending to see Empousa). These creatures constituted fodder for comic references and for satyr plays.

But what of Virgil in his depiction of Dido, in particular of her descent into madness? The fourth *Aeneid* is the shortest book in the Augustan poet's epic; it is a tragedy in three acts, each movement punctuated by adversative focus on the queen: *At regina*.<sup>53</sup> The first third sees the consummation of the union of Dido and Aeneas, and the monstrous advent of Fama. By the second *at regina* of the book (4.296), Aeneas has heeded Mercury's Jovian warning about fleeing Carthage. Fama is a female monster in her own right; after spreading the report of Dido's affair far and wide (most especially to her suitor Iarbas), she brings the news of Aeneas' planned escape (298-9). This triggers the queen's rage: 300-1 *saevit inops animi totamque incensa per urbem / bacchatur ...*

Dido makes an impassioned appeal to Aeneas, a rhetorically brilliant combination of bitter recrimination and pathetic importuning. She notes that it is regrettable that she does not even have a child by Aeneas, a son who might recall the appearance of his father: 327-9 *saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset / ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi paruulus aula / luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret*.<sup>54</sup>

Aeneas' reply (331-61) is not successful in calming his *quondam* paramour. The furious Dido makes a reply (362-92), after first letting her eyes roam all over her interlocutor: 362-3 *huc illuc uoluens oculos totumque pererrat / luminibus tacitis et sic accensa profatur ...* The detail about the queen's eyes will be echoed just before her suicide, of her sleepless, bloodshot gaze at 643 *sanguineam uolvens aciem*. Dido commences her speech by denouncing Aeneas as being the offspring of wild animals (365-7). She blames Juno and Jupiter for not gazing on the situation in Carthage with fair eyes: 371-2 *... iam iam nec maxima Iuno / nec Saturnius haec oculis pater aspicit*

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<sup>53</sup> *Aeneid* 4.1; 296; 504.

<sup>54</sup> We may compare 4.84-5, where the lovesick Dido keeps Ascanius in her arms so that she may retain the image of the father by gazing at his son; also the fact the entire mechanism by which Venus secured Dido's infatuation with Aeneas was via the substitution of Cupid for Ascanius (cf. 1.691-3). In effect, any threat by Dido against the child could be seen as a response to something of which she was unaware –the use of the child against her by Venus.

*aequis*. We have another beautiful Libyan queen, for whom childlessness is an affliction.

The queen proceeds to near imprecation, as she envisages an ideal scenario in which Aeneas were shipwrecked, as it were, lost amid the rocks and calling in vain for help on the name of Dido (382-4). Contrasting the image of marine horror with fiery destruction, the queen proceeds to make her own personal threat of pursuing Aeneas as a vengeful spirit even beyond the grave (384-6). She flees away from Aeneas' eyes after her dramatic speech (389 *aegra fugit seque ex oculis auertit et aufert*), with yet another visual reference.<sup>55</sup> While we cannot press speculation about intertextual sources too far in the absence of further evidence, what we do find in the account of the breakdown of Dido's relationship with Aeneas has an unusual number of correspondences to lore about Lamia and related female monsters: the emphasis on eyes; the connection to peril at sea; the mention of Juno and Jupiter as acting unfairly or unjustly; the idea of wraith-like pursuit even from beyond the grave.<sup>56</sup> And, tellingly, Lamia was a localized Libyan horror, originally a queen of the region like Dido.

Aeneas and his men prepare to leave. Dido sees the preparations from her lofty vantage point; again the poet reminds us of her vision and the power of sight (408-11), with repeated mention of eyes and the gaze of the queen. Dido seeks the aid of her sister Anna in making a final appeal to Aeneas; this endeavor will prove fruitless.<sup>57</sup> The queen prays for death, as eerie omens multiple, with strange sounds being heard from her husband Sychaeus' sepulcher, and nightmares in which she finds herself pursued by Aeneas (450-73). Resolved to commit suicide, Dido tells her sister that she has devised a

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. 6.467 ff., as the emphasis on Dido's eyes continues even as her shade flees away from Aeneas in the underworld. "Empousa" implies obstacle, appropriately enough both for the underworld bogey and for the shade of Dido.

<sup>56</sup> Caution here is particularly important given that we lack definitive knowledge of the state of lamia lore in Virgil's day. Possible echoes and allusions can be taken too far, with over analysis. And so, for example, we might think it fanciful to hear an echo of *Mormo* in *marmoreo* at 4.392, of the tomb-like marble chamber where Dido's servants being their mistress after her anguished, threatening address.

<sup>57</sup> The close of Dido's appeal comes with one of the most difficult verses in Virgil (4.436), a line beset with textual as well as interpretive problems. See Fratantuono and Smith *ad loc.* for a possible solution to one of its puzzles, whereby Dido is made to allude to her fantasy wish of slaying both Aeneas and his child.

plan by which either to win Aeneas back or to be rid of his love – a plan that will require a pyre (474-503).

The third and final movement of the book commences (504 *At regina*) as the queen proceeds to commence the dark rites. Here she becomes akin to a *lamia* in the generic sense of a witch practitioner of the black arts, the common Latin meaning of the term. Hecate is among the deities who are invoked by Dido as part of her occult rituals (511). She removes one shoe as part of the rubrical prescriptions of the rite: 518 *unum exuta pedem uinclis ...* The detail may be connected not only to liturgical instructions, but it points also to the “one-footed” Empousa.<sup>58</sup> The one-footed etymology was connected to how traditionally one of the monster’s legs was a bronze prosthetic.<sup>59</sup>

Night soon falls, and while the world of nature slumbers, Dido is devoid of rest as her love rages anew (532 *saevit amor ...*). She commences a soliloquy wherein she laments that she was not allowed to live an innocent life in the manner of wild beasts: 550-1 *non licuit thalami expertem sine crimine uitam / degere more ferae, talis nec tangere curas.*

While Dido utters no threats in her reflections, Aeneas is soon visited by a dream apparition of Mercury, with the god warning him that the queen is indeed planning trickery and deceit (563 *illa dolos dirumque nefas in pectore uersat*). Aeneas is warned that he will soon see destruction by water and by fire should he linger any longer in Carthage (566-8). And in a celebrated coda to his admonition, the oneiric vision makes a seemingly generic, misogynistic enjambed remark: *uarium et mutabile semper / femina est* (569-70).

We would argue that this famous Virgilian tag takes on specific, purposeful force if it alludes to the shapeshifting nature of such female bogeys as Lamia, Empousa, and Mormo. In context, there is a clear enough reference to the shifting moods of the queen, as she indulges now in self-pity, now in threat and vengeful curses.<sup>60</sup>

Aeneas is understandably frightened by the vision (571), and he proceeds to make his hasty escape. Dido soon enough sees the fleet make its departure; fire and destruction are on her mind at once (594). Like a true

<sup>58</sup> On monosandalism see Henderson *ad Lysistrata* 667-669.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. W.B. Stanford, 1963, *ad* 294.

<sup>60</sup> Lamia had marine associations with Scylla and Poseidon; the sea’s proverbial fickleness was sometimes associated with the perception of women’s changing moods (cf. Sophocles, fr. 811 Radt). See further A. Schiesaro, 2008, pp. 86-90.

shapeshifter (at least emotionally), she just as quickly wonders if she is insane, and if she is at all responsible for her own predicament (595-6), even as she proceeds at once to fantasizing about being able to kill her perceived enemies, indeed to serving young Ascanius as food to his father (602 *Ascanium patriisque epulandum ponere mensis*) as if she were Atreus with the sons of Thyestes.<sup>61</sup> She dreams of the death of son and father alike (605-6). She curses Aeneas, wishing him a death at sea, torn from the embrace of his son (616); she extends her terrible imprecation to the Aeneadae, praying for constant war between the future Romans and her Carthaginians.<sup>62</sup>

A number of parallel points between Dido and Aristophanes' shapeshifters may thus be enumerated. Some of these commonalties may be more compelling than others, but we would argue that the number of points is too striking to be mere coincidence, even if we cannot be certain how many details of the lore were known to Virgil. Lamia, like Dido, was in origin a lovely Libyan queen. Lamia threatened the children of others on account of loss of their own offspring; Dido is presented as a threat to Ascanius, and she expresses lament and regret that she has no child of her own. The eyes of Lamia figure in extant lore about her; Virgil likewise emphasizes the visual element in his Dido story to an unusual degree, with frequent references to Dido's eyes, not least when she is at moments of extreme frustration and wrath. Lamia is said in some sources to have been bibulous; this too can be paralleled in Virgil's presentation of Dido.<sup>63</sup> Lamia is sometimes identified as if male; Dido's name is said to have been the Punic for *virago*. Empousa is an underworld specter; so too Virgil's Dido; both women are associated with Hecate. Empousa was connected etymologically to the image of having one foot; Dido doffs a shoe for her climactic ritual. Lamia's story includes allusions to living a wild, feral life as a beast in remote haunts; this is exactly what Dido wishes she could have

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<sup>61</sup> For detailed survey of the relevant lore see A.J. Boyle, 2019, pp. lxxix-lxxviii. Dido arguably is worse than Horace's Lamia: she envisages serving the child to his father to eat.

<sup>62</sup> Dido commits suicide, like Cleopatra (and Antony); she reappears in the epic as an underworld shade, and haunts the narrative at certain emotionally charged moments (especially at the requiem for Pallas in *Aeneid* 11). Dramatic suicide scenes, we might note in passing, were sometimes a source of comic mockery too (see here Biles and Olson on *Vesp.* 522-3).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Aeneid* 1.728 ff. Cleopatra's fondness for drink was a feature of Augustan propaganda against her (see here R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, 1970, *ad c.* 1.37.12; S. Heyworth and J.H.W. Morwood, 2011, c. 3.11.56).

experienced instead of her regal, public life. Dido envisions watery doom for Aeneas; Lamia was the mother of Scylla and connected to marine disasters. Like her monstrous comparands, Dido threatens to haunt Aeneas even from beyond the grave, an infernal specter capable of tormenting the living.

Certainly by the time of her suicide, the transition of Dido from generous host of the Trojan exiles in North Africa to quasi-spectral banshee is complete. The misguided love affair of Aeneas with his Libyan host has been the proximate cause of untold suffering, not least for the future casualties of the three Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage. There are numerous compelling antecedents for Virgil's Dido from the pages of literature and history, from the child-killing Medea of Greek mythology to the triumvir Antony's Egyptian paramour. Among these sources of inspiration for the Augustan poet, we may include the Libyan Lamia of Aristophanes and related female shapeshifting monsters. Servius judged that the fourth *Aeneid* had an almost comic style, his generalizing verdict occasioned by the focus of the book on love ("...nam paene comicum stilum habet, nec mirum, ubi de amore tractatur ..."), almost as if it had elements of something from the catalog of the New Comedy of Menander or Terence. A more specific comic source for Virgil's Dido could be found in the Libyan Lamia, whose characteristic shapeshifting gives specific point to the sentiment of a woman as *varium et mutabile*.<sup>64</sup> More chillingly, in Virgil's verse the comic bogey for whom children constituted the primary audience for terror is transformed into an all too real specter, a Libyan queen whose anger and wrath would set into motion a long history of war and destruction for Rome.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> We may note too Virgil's Camilla has been connected to lycanthropic lore (cf. L.M. Fratantuono, 2009, pp. 393-401). Virgil's Dido and Camilla are the most fully developed mortal female characters from the respective halves of the epic; it would be interesting if both were associated (albeit in contrasting ways) to mythology about shapeshifters.

<sup>65</sup> There may be a note of black humor, too, in the fact that Dido is in part modeled on Cleopatra, whose child Caesarion was eliminated not by any lamia-like queen, but by Octavian.

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